

Politics, Education, and Public Sector Unions: A Report from Once-Again Bleeding Kansas

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Abstract

Kansas has become one of the fiercest battlegrounds in the United States' ideological wars, especially since the election of Sam Brownback as governor in 2010 and the establishment of conservative dominance in state politics in the 2012 election. This report, based on interviews conducted in September 2013, examines the recent conservative political surge and union strategies, paying special attention to the public sector and education. The findings accord with other studies indicating that state politics and elections are becoming more important as well as more heated as states become increasingly important sites of policy initiative, and they shed light on strategies utilized by unions in a conservative state. One key finding is that progressive organizations are placing greater emphasis on raising political awareness among members in order to encourage more active political and civic participation.

Kansas has become one of the fiercest battlegrounds in the United States' ongoing ideological wars. The state has been predominantly conservative for decades, yet long produced many leading moderate Republicans, from Dwight D. Eisenhower to Robert Dole. Democrats and Republicans tended to alternate in elections for governor, and public services, notably the public education system, are well regarded. However, virtual warfare between the Republican conservatives and moderates erupted in the early 1990s, and conservatives have established political dominance since the 2012 election, enabling Governor Sam Brownback to pursue what is arguably the nation's most radical conservative agenda.

This report examines the recent conservative political surge and progressive responses in Kansas, paying special attention to public sector, labor, and education issues. The main sources are formal interviews and informal discussions conducted during a one-week research trip to Kansas in September 2013, plus two follow-up phone interviews. The sources were mostly union officials or

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allies, and two former Republicans state legislators; all oppose the agenda championed by Brownback and his right-conservative supporters. Most if not all are supporters of public education and services.

The case accords with other studies that state politics and elections are becoming more important as well as more heated as states become increasingly important sites of policy initiative. Interviewees consistently observed that right-conservatives in Kansas have enjoyed massive funding and support from a well-developed but secretive network of conservative organs and organizations, and are able to generate massive flows of information and, allegedly, disinformation. Consequently, unions and grass-roots organizations are placing higher priority not just on active participation in workplaces, but on community and political engagement. More specifically, many interviewees emphasized the importance of raising political awareness and knowledge among citizens, as a means of encouraging more active political and civic participation.

Kansas' Polarized Politics

The Kansas Republican Party has been embroiled in a bitter civil war between moderates and conservatives since 1991, when conservatives used the heated abortion issue to mobilize activists during what they called the Summer of Mercy (Frank 2004; Judis 2007). Conservatives gained control of Kansas' lower house in the early 2000s, and with a successful 2012 election blitz against moderate Republicans, the House, the Senate, and governor's office all came under control of conservative Republicans for the first time in decades. Comparative surveys find the Kansas Congressional to be the most conservative in the US (cited in Helling and Kraske 2012a), and social and demographic factors support conservatism. The minority population, for example, is under 20 percent. "Increasingly, Kansas and Missouri are older, whiter, more rural and suburban, and more culturally conservative than Wisconsin, Minnesota, even New Mexico" (Helling and Kraske 2012b).

Journalist John Eligon (2012) observes that while Republican factions are fighting nationwide, "What sets the battle in Kansas apart is the distance between the factions. Conservative and moderate Republicans essentially operate as separate parties, and so far, no one—including Mr. Brownback—has stepped forward to try to bridge that gap in the popular tradition of moderation. Instead, each side claims to represent the soul of the party." To be sure, it is not unusual for conservatives to claim in newspaper reports that moderate Republicans opponents belong in the Democratic Party. One of my sources stated that the Republican sides in Kansas "had always tolerated each other" but now "the Republicans hate each other worse than the Republicans hate the Democrats."

Kansas' rightward turn reflects national trends, including a larger role for states in social and eco-

conomic policymaking, the resurgence of right-conservatism, and greatly increased spending even in local political campaigns (e.g., Schrager and Witwer 2010; Rapoport 2013a, 2013b). Many observers believe that states have taken on more important roles in policymaking, especially since the 2010 election. This is partly in reaction to the gridlock in Washington, and partly a result of the greater polarization in state politics. In an unusually large number of states, 37 in all, one party controls the statehouse and both legislative houses, enabling many governors to act with minimal opposition. Journalists Adam Nagourney and Jonathan Martin (2013) observe that “a particularly activist class of governors,” their parties in control of state legislatures, are able to “enact the kind of crisp agenda that has eluded both parties in Washington.” Brownback, who has also served twelve years in the Senate (1997–2009), exemplifies the activist conservative governor. One Kansas political insider commented, “I think Brownback is fascinated by how easy it is to change things as governor, as opposed to being one of 100 U.S. senators” (cited in Binelli 2013). Brownback himself told reporters, “At a state level, you can build consensus around what you need to do and get it done. In Washington, the system is just so big” (Nagourney and Martin 2013).

Charles and David Koch, Wichita natives and both ranked among five or ten richest Americans, are perhaps the most important enablers of the conservative resurgence¹⁾. The Koch brothers’ support for Brownback in his 1996 senate campaign was possibly decisive (Sharlet 2006). Despite their influence, however, Charles and David Koch long managed to keep largely out of public view. A number of Kansas interviewees acknowledged that they had barely noticed the Kochs until around three years ago, though Charles Koch still conducts business from Wichita. The Koch brothers have founded or funded several major conservative organs including Heritage Foundation and Americans for Prosperity (AFP), and, in Kansas, the Kansas Chamber of Commerce (largely run by former Koch enterprise employees), Kansans for Life, and Kansas Policy Institute (KPI); the extent of Koch involvement in these organizations is generally unclear, and the degree and influence of Koch influence in general, are increasingly matters of controversy (e.g., Wemple 2014). The Chamber of Commerce is reportedly run largely by former employees of Koch businesses, and the Kochs are also widely believed to provide much or nearly all the money for KPI and some other organizations, but the claims are mostly unproven.

One critic stated that the density of messaging generated by conservative institutions is important in lending credence to conservative claims, even when they lack real grounding:

“They put out research. And they have experts. And they look like they are this intellectual

1) Fang (2013: 22–24, 83–123), Fisher (2012). A third brother plays a similar, though less commanding, role in the conservative movement.

research organization that is for the good of the people, but not politically oriented...so you have an editorial by So-and-so PhD from the Kansas Policy Institute who gives all these figures about how the schools are over-funded, and you're like—it must be true...Then they write something with lots of statistics, and unless somebody refutes them with statistics it looks very powerful....They have a multi-headed messaging machine, so what the governor says is supported by Americans for Prosperity and the Kansas Policy Institute—the Chamber of Commerce now is putting out a lot of stuff to support what the governor says, and so it must be true. And the schools must be lying.”

Several other prominent Kansas conservatives are also tied into the national conservative infrastructure. The governor's budget director is AFP consultant Steve Anderson, who has pressed hard for privatization of services and abolition of the arts council (under Brownback, Kansas became the first state to totally defund the arts). Both KPI chair David Trabert and Susan Wagle, Senate president since December 2011, serve on the board of directors of American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). Trabert is a highly visible presence, constantly editorializing and appending comments to online media.

Brownback's long-time advisor, David Kensinger, is regarded by political observers as the leading strategist, and possibly the real force, behind the governor's agenda. Unlike Trabert, however, Kensinger keeps a low profile. Both Brownback and Kensinger reportedly held close ties to the George W. Bush White House, and some regard Kensinger as Brownback's “Karl Rove.” A constant concern for Brownback, as with other Tea Party-backed politicians, is that extremist conservative policies could alienate moderates, embarrass the state, and anger business. Conservative policies reportedly trouble big firms (such as Johnson County-based Sprint), making it difficult for them to hire people from non-conservative states, or complicating dealing with European partners “who don't understand this puritanical stuff.” Some observers believe that one of Kensinger's major functions is to protect corporate interests and the governor's image by keeping extremist conservatives in check. One source speculated that Kensinger engineered the defeat, in February 2014, of a bill to allow refusal of services to homosexuals on grounds of religious belief. The bill pleased the conservative base while drawing condemnation nationwide, but a veto by Senate President Wagle prevented serious damage.

Governor Brownback

Brownback quickly established himself as a leader of Congressional conservatives after winning

election to the House of Representatives in 1994 (he reportedly refused to sign Newt Gingrich's Contract With America because it was too tame), and to the Senate in 1996. He was noted for leading a frugal lifestyle, vigorously espousing Christian belief, and championing business interests. Many people reportedly assumed that Brownback, rhetoric notwithstanding, would govern as a moderate, just like his predecessors, and were surprised by his radical agenda. The administration has reduced welfare rolls, weakened unions, eliminated numerous state jobs, entrusted most of the state Medicaid system to private insurers, consolidated and reduced government agencies, moved to restructure pensions and education financing, instituted the nation's toughest drug testing regime, abolished funding for the arts, and sought to establish a comprehensive social regime regulating abortion, marriage, and other family matters. Secretary of State Kris Kobach has made himself a national figure by pressing hard-core policies to restrict immigrant and voting rights and encourage carrying of firearms. Journalist John Gramlich (2012) has observed that while "other Republican-led states have experimented with many of the same changes," Brownback "wants to make all of those changes simultaneously."

Especially important are the administration's tax and education policies. The Brownback administration enacted Kansas' largest ever tax cut in early 2013, then began seeking to eliminate the state income tax entirely, encouraging "similar overhaul proposals in the GOP-led states of Indiana, Louisiana, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio and Oklahoma" (King and Peters 2013). The tax policies impact strongly on public education, whose budget has been sharply reduced. State courts ruled the education budget cuts unconstitutional, leading Brownback to seek to overhaul the system for selecting justices. The Brownback administration is presently fighting Kansas state courts in an effort to gain near-complete authority over education policymaking. Progressive education spokespersons David Sciarra and Wade Henderson (2014) write the administration policies, if successful, would "send shock waves through state capitals across the nation."²⁾

Nevertheless, Brownback takes care to project a moderate image, partly by emphasizing his humanitarian achievements, concern for the poor, and support for environmentally friendly measures, such as renewable energy, typically despised by conservatives (Eligon 2014). Brownback is no friend of the public sector or of unions (he has declined to replace departed National Labor Relations Board members, further weakening unions), but he is too good a politician to openly attack public employees, as explained by former State Senator Pete Brungardt (a moderate Republican representing Salina, 2001-2013). "It's a no win, when you start attacking your work force. Now, they would still not give them raises, they would still do layoffs, they would still farm out the work sometimes, and

2) For a local take, see Hanna (2014).

they'd do everything nasty to them that you could imagine. But they would never pronounce that. They would also have a word of praise for hard-working cops, and our firemen."

2012 Election

Brownback's 2010 election victory (with 65 percent of the vote) marked the first time in a half century that Kansas had elected a conservative governor, and the first time in around 40 years that conservative Republicans captured a majority in the Kansas House of Representatives—around 70 of 125 seats. However, a *de facto* coalition of Democrats and Republican moderates blocked much of the governor's agenda in the Senate, leading conservatives to stage a fierce 2012 primary campaign. Brownback openly advocated the targeting of eleven moderate Republican senators in the 40-member chamber; eight, including Senate President Steve Morris, were decisively defeated, while the other three moderates eked out narrow victories. Some of the losing moderates were in reality quite conservative (e.g., Binelli 2013), and seem to have been targeted for minor differences. For example, Dick Kelsey, an evangelical pastor endorsed by anti-abortionists and the National Rifle Association, was apparently targeted for criticizing parts of Brownback's tax agenda and a Brownback appointee (Eligon 2012).

Progressive-leaning interviewees believed that the conservatives' triumph was the result of a strategy that was well-calculated, hard-core, and massively funded—and, above all, it took moderates by surprise. It is estimated that conservative groups, especially AFP, the Kansas Chamber of Commerce, the Club for Growth, and Kansans for Life, contributed anywhere from \$3 to \$8 million to the primary campaign (Binelli 2013). One observer noted, "Millions won't buy much in Chicago, but will buy a lot in Kansas." Republican moderates and Democrats have sometimes teamed up against aggressive conservatives, especially in many districts virtually unwinnable for Democrats (Frank 2004: 100), and some progressives have stepped up support since around 2008. At least two sources emphasized that the four remaining moderates—especially the three women were "tough" ("if you're going to come after me I'm going to swing back") and as being willing to play as rough as the conservatives themselves—or, as one put it, like Democrats accustomed to taking on hard-line conservative challenges.

Kensinger is regarded as the key architect of the conservative blitz. After reputedly learning from the renowned (and often reviled) conservative political strategist Karl Rove during Brownback's years in the US Senate, Kensinger is credited with using extensive polling to determine how to press an effective campaign against anti-moderate senators in 2012. Most notoriously, during the primaries, conservative candidates mailed massive volumes attack ads to Republican voters. These

fliers generally painted moderate Republican legislators as Obama allies and supporters of Obamacare. The Kansas Chamber of Commerce, for example, mailed a flier labeling Brungardt “Obama’s best friend in the Kansas Senate.” Though ridiculous, the claims are widely believed to have been effective. One observer explained, “What hit the moderates, was that many of them had been elected over and over. And [they] just kind of felt, well there’s no way I can get defeated.” He added, “Democrats have been in these fights for years. They knew how ugly this was going to get. Republicans said, ‘Well, they won’t do that against me, I’m one of them.’ By the time they got hit it was too late to respond.” Many voters received fliers for days on end, and moderates lacked the money and time to respond.

Brungardt, however, denied being taken by surprise (“if you’d been in Topeka and seen the day-to-day [activities]...no surprise at all”), instead giving credit to the “impressive” performance of the conservatives in mobilizing their base (phone interview, February 11, 2014). Conservatives had turned out in large numbers for the previous three or four voting cycles, Brungardt recalled, but achieved an even higher level in 2012. “They had pretty extensive lists of people from church groups and gun groups and abortion groups and anti-tax groups and anti-government groups...and they contacted those people pretty vigorously.” The National Rifle Association (NRA) helped energize the base by assigning Brungardt an F rating, which he claims “They totally made up,” since he did not oppose their policies³⁾. In addition, abundant funding helped conservatives make important late pushes. Brungardt believes an all-out campaign of targeted phoning at the very end of the election contributed to his defeat. Similarly, Kelsey, who held a 20-point lead 13 days before the election according to one poll, believes a massive barrage of negative fliers factored in his loss (Binelli 2013).

Brundgardt doubts the fliers were convincing. “It was kind of a joke with my people, that Obama was running against my opponent and not me...They kept linking me to the Affordable Care Act, and obviously I didn’t have anything to do with it...As if I had drafted it and passed it in Congress single-handedly or something.” Another moderate Republican, former Lower House representative Charlie Roth (representing Salina, 2005–2011) disagreed with Brungardt regarding the fliers. Noting that most citizens pay little attention to details of candidates’ policy positions during primary elections, Roth thinks that many Republicans bombarded with mail did not actually read the content, but internalized the message that moderates had links to Obama (phone interview, February 17, 2014).

3) Brungardt noted that he had had good relations with the NRA until around 2010 despite not favoring many of its policies. The association may be pursuing a more aggressive strategy of allying with conservatives, as it also strongly opposed the well publicized organizing campaign by the United Auto Workers at the Volkswagen auto plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee in early 2014.

Public Sector

Despite the state's conservatism, unions (notably teachers unions) have operated with some effectiveness. Wichita was long a minor union stronghold, but the union grip has weakened with the shrinking of the city's aviation manufacturing industry. Kansas is a right-to-work state, and the lack of strike rights has become a more difficult problem for unions over the past fifteen years as the economy has weakened and conservatives strengthened, making it difficult to gain benefits for members. An official for SEIU Local 513, representing mainly public sector employees in Wichita and other cities, described several recent modest successes in gaining wage raises and protecting jobs, but observed that it is difficult to organize new workers. "We're not seen by the workers as having the kind of clout that the private sector unions do, for a couple of reasons. The private sector unions can strike legally, and does occasionally from time to time." Further, he stated, the NLRB is weaker for public than private sector workers, and has weakened further under Brownback. "There is almost no enforcement now."

Nevertheless, two officials of Kansas National Association of Educator (KNEA) interviewed separately believe that Kansas' public sector unions have considerable potential to stimulate and support progressive campaigns in Kansas. KNEA represents not just teachers but a broad range of workers in the public sector or public services, and boasts 18 field organizers. One official suggested that they are the most organized group in Kansas, with organizations in all of the state's 105 counties. However, the other official, equally committed but less buoyant, cautioned that unions will face hard-core tactics from conservatives, and estimated that around 70 percent of members of KNEA and most other Kansas unions are Republicans.

A high Republican membership is not necessarily a major problem in Kansas at present since the Republican primaries are decisive more frequently than the general elections (not to mention that one union official stated that his public sector members, Republicans and Democrats alike, hate Brownback). As in some other states, and in line with the increasing strategic importance of state elections, union officials are encouraging members to become politically at the local level. KNEA officials reported some success in pushing up its members' primary voting rate. On the other hand, one union official noted that voting restrictions introduced by Kobach are making it harder for unions to participate in voter registration drives.

One of the KNEA officials interviewed stressed the importance of lobbying legislators ("Lobbying is 365" even though the Kansas legislature meets just 90 days a year). As much as possible, he gets members to perform the task by meeting with legislators in their home districts⁴⁾. A common theme in conversations with Kansas union officials was the importance of getting members to be active in

both workplace organizing and political action, not only because of the increasing importance placed on active participation, but because unions in this low-population, conservative state lack the resources to field large staffs. Instead, officials emphasize providing guidance and support for inexperienced members. Another sign of rising political awareness and activism is the stepped-up organizing of demonstrations around the capital in Topeka or before offices of conservative organs like Americans for Prosperity. These increasingly involve unions and their diverse social partners (interviews, KNEA officials; Rothschild 2013).

In the meantime, unions are fighting off political threats, partly through more intensive mobilization of members. Following the 2012 election, conservative legislators moved to restrict union prerogatives (Hancock and Cooper 2013; Cooper 2013). A Chamber of Commerce lobbyist clumsily acknowledged the conservative agenda in January 2013 when he told legislators, “I need this bill passed so we can get rid of public sector unions” (the lobbyist subsequently attempted to disavow the comment, which was reported in most state newspapers and preserved for posterity in a YouTube audio file). Unions limited the damage with some vigorous mobilizing and lobbying. Unions are no longer allowed to use electronic payroll due deductions for political activities, but they maintained payroll deductions for dues, and kept the two public sector bargaining acts intact. As many Kansas unions are attempting to bolster active member participation, one KNEA official noted, “Part of our focus was to get to members as much as possible [to participate in political campaigning]....If we lost payroll deduction, we wouldn’t have been able to develop staff.” Meanwhile, some observers believe that conservatives are quietly targeting the Kansas National Association of Educators (KNEA) for supporting moderate politicians in recent elections.

One way that unions tried to head off damage was communicating with conservative legislators when possible. Officials of United Teachers of Wichita (UTW) regard the House members elected in 2012 as generally more approachable and less doctrinaire than the new senators. Many, they stated, “were new and politically inexperienced, not captive to Koch.” “We could get them to see that it was not as simple as they thought it was going to be, especially when they had to vote on issues that would hurt education. Most did not run on privatization type platforms. They were primarily fiscal conservatives, anti-tax.” UTW officials noted that some conservatives tend to automatically regard public unions as representing the “moochers and leachers of society,” but the new legislators were “not necessarily hostile to public education. And certainly when we can help them to understand that public unions means teachers, fire fighters, police officers, then it’s a different thing.”

In addition, teachers union officials pressed union members to participate in the early 2013 legis-

4) Unnamed sources are identified as male (“he”), regardless of actual gender.

lative forums, which enable voters to interact with legislators. As a result, the March 23rd session near Wichita, covering public sector collective bargaining, was standing room only with over 300 participants. (“We packed the place.”) UTW officials stated, “We did not let them [conservatives] dominate the proceedings. Since they had the Q&A format, we used it to our advantage. We had lots of supporters.” They also helped members prepare for questioning. One KNEA official observed, “Usually these were quiet things...Public teachers here were extremely under siege. They wanted to eliminate public sector bargaining...that switched the whole debate around. We got media coverage on it, we educated the community. We were very careful, we stuck to [a few] questions.”

UTW officials had a similar take. “Especially when new House members started hearing the outrage, they toned down the anti-public sector rhetoric. They realized they had under-estimated the organizing capability of teachers. The number of people at the forums made them realize—that their positions not so popular after all.” One Middle School teacher received a standing ovation after telling legislators that she opposed a ban on political contribution deductions (McMillin 2013). “I did not give up my private citizen rights when I became a teacher,” she stated. “It’s my money. I earned it.” Although unions limited their losses to payroll deductions for voluntary contributions to political action committees, they anticipated that conservatives would attack again in 2014. “We lived to fight another day.” “We’re making efforts, we know they’re coming back after us again in January.”

Bolstering member mobilization is another major concern for officials, but UTW and KNEA officials presented much different perspectives on their environments. One KNEA official, as noted above, waxed optimistic that Kansas has important and untapped potential for liberal activism. While Lawrence (home to Kansas University) is the state’s clear liberal stronghold, the official believes that Manhattan (home to Kansas State University), is also home to numerous progressives, as well as the Manhattan Alliance for Peace and Justice (unrelated to the university). As a result of budget cutting, university workers, especially cleaners, have suffered severe worsening of work conditions over the past several years as staff has been reduced (pay has simply remained low), even as compensation for university officials has risen sharply. With cleaning and maintenance personnel shouldering greater workloads as they grow older, their health is increasingly at risk. However, one conversation suggested that the state’s squeezes on budgets and employees provides opportunities as well as troubles, with suggestions that poor treatment could encourage an alliance between potential community activists and workers into a broader, more effective local movement. A KNEA official also reported some early success in engaging Kansas State students, whom it encourages to speak to legislators when they visit campus. One organization of interest is Sunflower Community Action, which supports a wide range of immigration and other progressive causes.

Education

Kansas' public school system is generally well regarded, but Brownback is intent on overhauling it; raising fourth grade reading proficiency and instituting all-day kindergarten are among his signature policy objectives (although some suspect the latter is aimed mainly at improving his image among moderates). The debate largely breaks down along standard liberal-conservative lines, with liberals/moderates arguing that public schools perform well, but that poverty and changing demographics are increasingly serious problems, and conservatives arguing that public schools do not serve the needs of minorities and special-needs children. Both sides have data to make their cases. New York Times reporter Eligon writes, "Although the state has remained among the top five in the nation [in reading proficiency], the share of Kansas' black fourth graders reading below a basic level rose to 53 percent last year from 44 percent in 2009, before the governor took office." In legislative hearings in early 2014, the Kansas Education Commission presented data indicating that public educational performance remains generally strong, but has been undermined by Brownback's budget cuts. Traber countered strongly that the system does not support disadvantaged students, and that the general education budget need not be increased. "We really have a two-tiered education system in Kansas. More money is not the answer" (Hancock 2014).

Education policy disputes in Kansas trace back to the 1960s, when a Constitutional amendment mandating "suitable provision for finance" of public education sparked several court battles. The current dispute began in the late 1990s, when Schools for Fair Funding (SFFF), an NPO comprising several school districts and supporters, brought suit against the legislature in *Montoy vs. the State of Kansas* for failing to adequately fund public education. In 2005, justices ruled for the plaintiffs, forcing the legislature to raise the basic state funding from around \$3,900 per student to \$4,492. Nevertheless, Brownback pared spending back to \$3838, leading SFFF to sue again in 2012 in *Gannon v. State of Kansas*. A district court in January 2013 supported the plaintiffs, and ordered the legislature to increase per-pupil expenditures to the mandated \$4,492. The state is appealing in the Supreme Court (where the judges reportedly expressed displeasure about having to adjudicate budget matters; Eligon 2014). Conservatives are vowing to resist the courts should they lose (as expected) by ignoring the ruling and proceeding with their desired tax and education funding policies⁵⁾.

The amount of spending is an especially bitter point of contention (with some evidence to support both sides—see Hancock 2013). In September 2013, the non-profit Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, in its annual report on education spending, calculated that state spending on K-12 public

5) Sources include interviews, Eligon (2013b, 2014), and the School Finance Litigation website (http://www.robblaw.com/html/school_finance.html).

education in Kansas had declined 16.5 percent from 2008, the fourth sharpest decrease nationwide (Leachman and Mai 2013). An AFP spokesperson quickly countered that the numbers distorted matters by failing to account for all funding sources, including local taxes, and cited Trabert's calculation that public school expenditures had increased \$301.6 million over that period when considering all sources (Givens 2013). Kansas conservatives insist that Brownback has raised spending every year⁶⁾. Nevertheless, base state aid has been cut, while much of the claimed additional state spending has gone to Kansas' underfunded public employee pension system (Llopis-Jepsen 2013).

Local governments have responded to budget cuts by raising fees and property taxes, eliminating staff, increasing class size, and reducing services and extracurricular activities. A school board member in Goddard, near Wichita, spelled out budget cuts in a newspaper commentary and countered conservative claims by writing, "the state is now taking credit for the funds we have collected from fees and additional property taxes as though they sent us those funds" (McWhorter 2013). Judith Deedy, an officer of pro-public education advocacy group Game On (interviewed on September 19, 2013), states that even in affluent Shawnee Mission, schools have "no funds for library books....Our janitors have gone to cleaning classrooms once every three days instead of every day. They've laid off 400 staff members [including] special ed teachers...We keep running out of paper by the end of the year. People like me send in a ream of paper. My daughter's class a few years ago ran out of the jump ropes and kick balls before the school year was over, so I wrote out a check for hula hoops and jump ropes and kick balls." The experience is not necessarily unusual—in affluent Baldwin as well, services have been cut sharply and "students showed up [for the start of fall 2013 classes] not just with personal school supplies but also office and cleaning supplies—two reams of A4 copy paper per student and table wipes for the classrooms" (Llopis-Jensen 2013).

Deedy, along with sources in Lawrence and Wichita, noted rising numbers of students receiving subsidized lunches even in affluent school districts. She expressed uncertainty as well as concern, especially for lower-income school districts, and wondered whether people were "falling down a little bit" or migrating in from other areas. Researchers suspect that both factors are in play. Large numbers of working poor are drawn to the abundant but low-paid service sector jobs in Johnson County, while many once affluent families have been rocked by the disappearance of good jobs since 2008 ("they tried to hold out for better jobs, and found themselves spending their savings to maintain a sense of normalcy, certain that a good opportunity would be around the corner"; Potts 2013). Kansas City, Kansas (along with Kansas City, Missouri) has long had a high poverty rate, but the number of low-income families has more than doubled since 2008 in the suburbs as well. In Wichita,

6) See the KPI newsletter, notably the September 30, 2013 edition, for the conservative take on the budget structure.

there are around 55,000 students in public schools, and 75 percent receive free or reduced rate lunches. The ratio reaches nearly 100 percent in some schools.

Probably aiding conservative policymaking efforts is public confusion over economic condition and budget issues—many Kansans prefer reduced state government spending, but do not realize that education and social services account for most spending. 44.5 percent of respondents to the 2013 Kansas Speaks survey called for reduced state government spending, but 66.5% supported increased K-12 funding, 45.1 percent for higher education, and 50.1 percent for social services. The Hays Daily News (2013) indirectly noted a lack of support for Brownback administration policies. “Support for spending increases is so strong that three in five participants support school districts being allowed to sue the state Legislature to increase their funding. Respondents are also decisive on how they would pay for extra spending, strongly favoring tax increases for large corporations and wealthier Kansans, with majorities supporting higher taxes for both groups.” Brownback’s budget agenda pushes the opposite direction.

Teachers unions and some local activists seek to counter conservative policies by mobilizing teachers and parents. However, UTW officials noted difficult local obstacles. They expressed strong respect for the professionalism of Wichita teachers, but also frustration at their lack of political consciousness. This reflects partly a lack of knowledge of earlier struggles. “We have a lot of teachers who do not remember the times before collective bargaining. We didn’t have collective bargaining in the 1970s. What they don’t get is, we didn’t get that out of the good graces of the legislature.” The officials estimated that up to 20 percent are not registered to vote. Somewhat surprisingly, former Senator Brungardt expressed similar views. “Their jobs and their well-being are directly to the legislature each and every year, and yet they just are not engaged...To me they’re a group that [should] be vitally interested [in politics], and they just don’t seem to be.” UTW officials are intent on making members aware of the dangers they face, and (a recurring theme of the interviews) of the limits of the unions’ resources. “Because we have limited resources—we stay involved in getting out the vote...What we were comfortable with before—lots of time, no threats [from conservatives]...We would say every year, bad things are going to happen in the legislature. There were friendly legislators, people we could persuade.”

Union officials described teachers as “by and large submissive.” They believe that teachers tend to be caring rather than confrontational⁷⁾. “[They are] caring and nurturing mostly. Even males. When you care about people you work with, you tend to avoid conflict.” The description may apply

7) Gender statistics are not gathered, but an insider estimates that Wichita teachers are around 70 percent female. This is partly because there are significantly more teachers in K-6, where women typically predominate, than in junior and senior high schools.

mainly to the region, however. An official in charge of political action for the California Federation of Teachers (CFT) believes that this description fails to characterize California teachers, whom he finds perfectly assertive⁸⁾.

The social environment makes it difficult to engage the Wichita community as officials would wish. Residents constantly move in and out of the city, and many youth do not complete high school. Networking with PTAs is not especially useful, as Wichita does not have a central PTA group, though officials say they have made progress in developing ties with the state PTA. The community has become highly diverse, and interviewees put the number of languages spoken in public schools from the low 70s to as high as 88. Some immigrants are illegal residents who strive to remain under the radar. Meanwhile, most teachers are still white middle class. “They go into classrooms, they don’t even look like them [students],” lamented a former UTW official.

Forming effective social coalitions is also difficult. UTW officials stated, “The conundrum for us is that the best organizers have a liberal agenda, but we live in a very conservative area. And even teachers and our members are fairly conservative.” Similarly, the SEIU official noted that his union’s membership in Wichita is predominantly male, and therefore leans more strongly conservative than the majority-female teachers. Networking with the League of Women Voters has helped UTW to better engage the African-American community, but allying with Sunflower Community Action, as at least some KNEA officials hope to do, would be impractical. “They have baggage, collateral issues. You have to take on their issues to get them to take on your issues. Sunflower is engaged in MoveOn type stuff—we don’t need that.” Wisconsin unions, especially in the public sector, cultivated ties with LGBT and other liberal groups for years, and were rewarded with strong support during the 2011 demonstrations against Scott Walker’s anti-unions policies⁹⁾; UTW officials would like to pursue the same networking strategy but believe it would be futile. “Some gay teachers want to know why we don’t have partner resolutions. I can bring it up, but it is a non-starter here. It would antagonize some of our members.”

Although public sector unions are in many ways limited, grass-roots movements in support of public education have also arisen around the country. In Johnson County, a group of parents started Game On to counter conservative education policies (Hammill 2013). A small group of parents at a Prairie Village elementary school began meeting to discuss concerns such as growing class sizes about three years, and the conversation with Game On’s Deedy suggests that the group experienced a steady political awakening (though she did not use such phrasing). Learning of likely funding cut-

8) Skype interview, January 30, 2014.

9) Interview, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) officials in Madison, Wisconsin (March 2013).

backs, “They [parents] said, We want to be involved in the discussion, we don’t want to hear about decisions after they’re made...So this small group started meeting with our local representative to the Shawnee Mission school board...and they realized, Oh, a lot of what we’re talking about is really coming out of the legislature. So then they started meeting with our local senator and our local representative...” Deedy, who voted for Brownback in 2010, joined the group after growing alarmed as she learned about Montoy and other education-related controversies as assistant legislative liaison to the school’s PTA. As a lawyer, she was upset with the administration’s dismissive attitude towards the judiciary (“I didn’t think Supreme Court decisions were optional!”).

The core tasks of Game On are using grass-roots advocacy to raise understanding and awareness of educational issues, and mobilizing people to take political action (while creating space for parents who are not highly politically motivated to participate as well). The first specific goal is to educate people about issues, while another goal is “to make people understand that judicial selection is very directly related to school funding.” Game On encourages members to engage legislators, not only to make their opinions known, but to make sure they know how they are actually voting, and then to bolster pro-public education politicians against conservative tactics. Therefore, “[We] teach them [members] how to engage—email your legislator, call your legislator. I’d never done that before I got involved in this stuff. And it feels weird the first time you do it...I hear some people say, Well, our legislators are voting correctly, we don’t need to contact them. But I say, No no, they get in a meeting, they hear from conservatives, I have 75 emails saying they want charter schools. They need to be able to get up there and say, I’ve got a hundred telling me not to vote for this bill.”¹⁰⁾

Charter schools and school privatization have not yet advanced much in Kansas—controversy under Brownback has so far centered on budget cuts rather than charter schools per se—because laws remain restrictive. As of late 2013, the state had only 15 charter schools, all supervised by local school boards. Nevertheless, many conservatives instinctively distrust public education, believing it to be rife with waste and coddled teachers, and they appear to be stepping up efforts to shift resources toward private institutions. In March 2013, a bill paving the way toward allowing subsidized tax credits for private school scholarships was defeated in the House 63-56; critics believe that such programs are indirect means of diverting public funds to private educational concerns, and that the term scholarship obscures the fact that they use subsidized vouchers. When the measure again came up for legislative debate in early 2014, Game On representative Teresa Throckmorton argued, “Donating money that is given back is not philanthropy,” and pointed out that the bill would effectively

10) However, public schools and teachers unions in Missouri are hard-pressed; interview, AFT official, Kansas City, Missouri (March 15, 2013).

remove money from the state general fund (Llopis-Jepsen 2014).

A senior SEIU official in Wichita noted that conservatives in Wichita, repeating the national conservative strategy, often appeal to African-Americans to support charter schools. They typically seek to gain support from prominent members of the black community. (Indeed, KPI's February 10, 2014 online newsletter headlines the support of African-American celebrities Deion Sanders, Jalen Rose, and Lou Gossett, Jr. for charter schools.) Wade Moore, an African-American pastor seeking to open a charter school in Wichita, has stated, "When we look at African-American children and we see the dropout rate, see the test scores...we can do more" (Tobias 2013). Alicia Thomas Morgan, an African-American Democratic politician from Atlanta, traveled to Wichita in late 2013 to push charter schools, claiming that they would "transform lives" (Tobias 2013); critics suspect Koch money paid for Morgan's excursion. SEIU staff is countering through vigorous lobbying of legislators, especially Democrats and African-Americans. Echoing concerns of KNEA representatives regarding custodians in state universities, the SEIU official contends that school privatization consistently brings elimination of custodial and maintenance jobs, or sharp wage cutting. Liberalizing charter schools would threaten 304 public custodial jobs, many of them held by blacks. "If the African-American community gets hit by 100 custodians losing jobs and benefits—what are considered good jobs in the African-American community—it's going to devastate that community."

Conclusion

Kansas exemplifies the swing toward more contentious local- and state-level politics throughout the US. The swing seems to be especially strong because money and messaging from the conservative infrastructure have enabled conservative politicians to gain a commanding majority in the state legislature. That in turn has enabled Governor Sam Brownback to pursue what is arguably the most aggressive conservative agenda in the nation. With the left and the union movement relatively weak, much of the political furor is played out between moderate and conservative Republicans, with Democrats and various unionists or progressives quietly supporting moderate Republicans. Not surprisingly, Brownback's strategies have attracted growing opposition, notably the growing willingness of moderate Republicans to support Democrat Paul Davis, Brownback's likely challenger in the 2014 gubernatorial election (e.g., *Lawrence Journal World* 2013).

Interviews and other sources indicate that unions and sympathetic or allied activists in Kansas are placing great emphasis on raising the political awareness of members. In part, it reflects the common need for unions to make members aware that their workplace prerogatives can no longer be taken for granted, a common theme nationwide for the past two decades. It also indicates the

strength of conservative efforts to weaken public sector unions. Interviews in Kansas indicate that unionists and their supporters, and opponents of the conservative agenda, are placing increasing importance on raising political awareness and grass-roots mobilization. One of the most important new areas of concern is active communication with and lobbying of legislators. This new strategy reflects both the need to respond to the massive flow of messages and information (or, according to sources, disinformation) that allegedly mislead distracted voters and parents.

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